

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

### CONTENTS

#### NOVELETTE

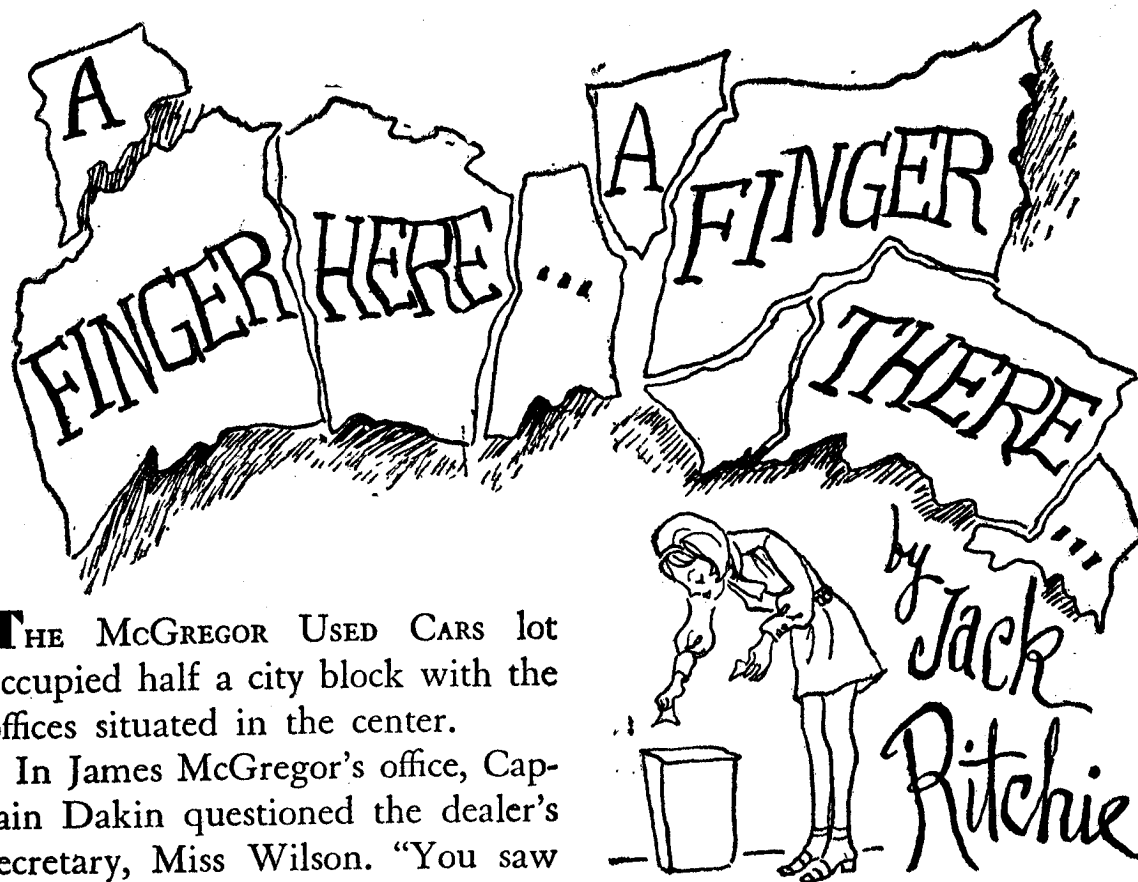
- No ESCAPE *by C. B. Gilford* ..... 138

#### SHORT STORIES

- THE SINGLE WING EPICURE *by Frank Sisk* ..... 2
- EULOGY *by Pauline C. Smith* ..... 19
- A FINGER HERE . . . A FINGER THERE . . . *by Jack Ritchie* ..... 26
- EARLY SUNDAY MORNING *by Jonathan Craig* ..... 36
- THE ALL-SEEING EYE *by Edward Y. Breese* ..... 41
- NOTHING BUT HUMAN NATURE *by Hillary Waugh* ..... 58
- WHO SITS IN JUDGMENT *by Michael Zuroy* ..... 67
- STRANGER'S GIFT *by Talmage Powell* ..... 78
- ASHES TO ASHES *by Leo R. Ellis* ..... 91
- THE CLINCHER *by Jack Foxx* ..... 100
- DEATH AT STONEHENGE *by Norma Schier* ..... 106
- A ROCK HAS MANY SIDES *by John G. Hill* ..... 121
- SUCCESS STORY *by Richard M. Ellis* ..... 133

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*It requires more than frugality to scotch a kidnapping.*



**T**HE MCGREGOR USED CARS lot occupied half a city block with the offices situated in the center.

In James McGregor's office, Captain Dakin questioned the dealer's secretary, Miss Wilson. "You saw Mr. McGregor tear up the note?"

"Yes. Though he wasn't aware that I was watching him at the time."

"And when he left the office, you went to the wastepaper basket, took out the pieces, and put them together again, jigsaw fashion?"

"Yes. Just feminine curiosity, I guess."

"Snoopiness," McGregor growled. Dakin ignored him. "And then

you telephoned the department?"

"Not right away," Miss Wilson said. "First I confronted Mr. McGregor with the reconstructed note."

"What was his reaction?"

"He said, 'Bah! Humbug!'"

The pieces of the note had been pasted to a sheet of paper. Dakin studied it again. "It says here, Mr. McGregor, that if you do not pay

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the kidnappers \$200,000, your nephew will be returned to you in installments. A finger here, a toe there."

McGregor shrugged.

Dakin frowned. "Just how old is your nephew?"

"Thirty. Thirty-one. Something like that."

"Twenty-nine," Miss Wilson said.

"When did you see him last?"

"About ten days ago," McGregor said.

"Ten days ago?"

McGregor colored slightly. "So he's been gone for a while. I don't keep tabs on everything my nephew does."

"Isn't he also one of your salesmen?"

McGregor looked pained. "Salesman? He doesn't know a thing about cars. Look at that lemon he drives."

Dakin blinked. "You sold your own nephew a lemon?"

McGregor drew himself up. "He didn't buy the car from this lot."

Miss Wilson explained. "Albert—Mr. McGregor's nephew—doesn't trust his uncle. Especially when it comes to cars."

Dakin put the note into a brown envelope. "I'd like to mention that it is the official policy of our department to discourage the payment of ransoms. Once these kid-

nappers get it through their heads that they're never going to get ransoms, they're going to stop kidnapping people and turn to something else."

McGregor agreed. "I won't pay a cent."

Captain Dakin smiled confidentially. "I also think it's only fair to tell you that this is only the *official* stand of the department. *Unofficially*, of course, it is preferable that the ransom be paid and the victim released. That way we are free to swing into action without fear of the victim being harmed."

McGregor reiterated his position. "They won't get a penny out of me."

Dakin tried again. "What I mean is that, after all, there is a human life at stake."

"They're bluffing."

"A possibility," Dakin conceded, "but on the other hand, suppose they aren't?"

"They *are*," McGregor insisted. "I ignored the first two notes and nothing happened."

There was a silence and then Dakin took a deep breath. "There were *two* other notes?"

McGregor shifted uncomfortably. "I guess I forgot to mention that."

"Where are they now?"

"Incinerated long ago. I tore them up. Evidently when my secretary wasn't at the keyhole." Mc-

Gregor tried a smile of reason. "After all, Captain, the kidnappers didn't say that they were going to kill Albert right off—in one piece, so to speak—now, did they? Suppose we wait until we get a few toes or something before we get rash with \$200,000. I'm sure that even my nephew would see the fairness of that."

Dakin's eyes went to the plate glass windows and the lot beyond. "I understand that you have one of the most successful used car lots in the state."

McGregor almost smiled, but then controlled himself. "Exaggeration by people who don't know the business." He watched one of his salesmen descend upon a prospective customer. "I couldn't possibly raise \$200,000. It's absolutely impossible."

"How much *could* you raise?" Miss Wilson asked.

He scowled at her. "None of your business."

But Dakin saw possibilities in that. "After all, \$200,000 is just their asking price. Perhaps you could negotiate? Would it do any real harm to offer \$50,000?"

"No," McGregor said firmly. "I will not negotiate."

At seven-thirty that evening, Nora Wilson switched to the channel carrying her parents' favorite

television program and retired to the kitchen.

She made two salami sandwiches, wrapped them in waxed paper, and went back to the doorway. Her parents were completely engrossed in their program.

Nora carried the sandwiches and a quart of milk down to the basement. She stopped at the door of the fruit cellar and knocked softly.

Albert McGregor opened the door. "It gets lonely down here. I haven't heard or seen anybody but you in ten days."

Nora put the food on the small wooden table. "Mother hasn't needed the fruit cellar in years and Dad hasn't been down here either since we converted from coal to natural gas."

Albert took a bite from a sandwich. "I *know* Uncle James can afford at least two hundred thousand. He has at least double that safely tucked away. Why doesn't he pay? After all, I *am* a relative, even though we don't really get along at all."

"Some people are like that, dear," Nora said. "They have no respect for family ties. If only we had some fingers to send him—just one would probably do the trick." She sighed. "If only I were a medical intern or technician or something like that, I'm sure I

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could pick up a finger or two."

Albert looked doubtful. "When you get right down to it, that probably wouldn't work anyway. If we sent a stranger's finger, undoubtedly the police would immediately compare it with the fingerprints in my army file and discover that nothing matched."

"How about a toe?"

Albert rubbed his jaw. "I don't think that would work either. There's my hospital birth record. The police could check the toe with the hospital where I was born."

"But they take only one footprint, Albert. We could get a toe from the other foot."

Albert frowned. "Yes, but *which* footprint was taken when I was born? Right or left? I don't remember."

Miss Wilson entered the office and put a small package on McGregor's desk. "This was just delivered."

Captain Dakin and McGregor stared at the package. It was approximately four inches long and wrapped in brown paper.

McGregor leaned forward cautiously. "There doesn't seem to be a return address. Just my name."

Dakin agreed.

Neither of them made a move to touch the package.

Dakin turned to Miss Wilson. "The mailman brought this?"

"No," she said. "A messenger."

"A *uniformed* messenger?"

"Why, no," Miss Wilson said. "He wore an ordinary jacket. He just gave me the package and left."

Dakin rushed to the office door and pulled it open. "Sergeant Holloway!"

Halloway had been reading a magazine. "Yes, chief?"

"Did you see who delivered a small package to Miss Wilson just now?"

Halloway nodded. "Sure. He's gone now."

"Well, go after him and bring him back," Dakin ordered. "And don't take any chances."

Dakin reentered the inner office and looked at the package. "Aren't you going to open it, McGregor?"

McGregor licked his lips. "I think you'd better do it, Captain. I consider this to be police business, more or less."

Dakin did not appear to relish the assignment, but he opened a pocketknife. "We'll keep the knot intact. A lot of cases have been solved because of knots, though I can't think of any at the moment."

He cut the string.

"There might be fingerprints," Dakin said. He wrapped a handkerchief around each one of his



hands and then slowly and clumsily unfolded the wrapper. He exposed a small cardboard box. He held it to his ear and shook it several times. "I guess they got it wrapped in cotton."

Carefully he pulled off the cover and they stared at the contents.

After fifteen seconds, McGregor spoke up meekly. "It's my wrist-watch. I left it over at Moorhead's Jewelry Shop for repairs, and asked them to deliver it when it was done. I forgot all about it."

Sergeant Halloway appeared in the doorway, service revolver in

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one hand and the other grasping the collar of a frightened teen-ager. "He gave me some kind of song and dance about being just a messenger boy for a jewelry store, Captain. Do I take him to headquarters?"

Captain Dakin rubbed the back of his neck and sighed.

The next morning, McGregor and Dakin met again in McGregor's office.

McGregor was furious. "I thought it was police policy to keep these affairs secret? Reporters have been hounding me ever since noon yesterday."

"I'm sorry," Dakin said, "but there's nothing I can do about it. Every newspaper in the city got a note from the kidnappers. I checked them out. Same typewriter, same kind of notepaper."

McGregor's hand swept over the newspapers scattered over his desk. "Just what do the kidnappers expect to accomplish by all of this publicity?"

Dakin cleared his throat. "I think their strategy is to shame you into making the ransom payment."

McGregor drew himself up. "Shame me? I refuse to be shamed just as much as I refuse to be intimidated."

Miss Wilson made a few doodle marks in her stenographic notebook. "Why don't you hold a raf-

fle? Now that this case has gotten a lot of publicity, you shouldn't have any trouble getting rid of tickets."

McGregor frowned, but he was listening.

"You could charge two dollars or something like that for tickets. And the entire proceeds ought to be tax deductible, considering that it would go to charity of a sort. I mean ransoming somebody before they're dismembered is certainly a work of charity, isn't it?"

McGregor's eyes clouded thoughtfully.

"And you could offer one of your automobiles as first prize," Miss Wilson said.

McGregor went along with that. "How about that four-door sedan at the end of aisle B. Air-conditioning. One owner. Power steering. Stereo. Champagne with matching interior. Like new."

Miss Wilson glanced out of the window. "Is that the one you said would lose its transmission in a couple of months?"

McGregor glared at her. "There's nothing wrong with that car. I give a full thirty-day warranty with every car I sell. Or give away. All defective parts will be replaced free. The labor is something else, of course."

Captain Dakin vetoed the project. "I'm afraid a raffle is out. They're

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against the law in this state, even if they are for charity."

After Dakin left, McGregor began pacing the office. "Now suppose, just *suppose* that I *were* able to raise the \$200,000? Do you really think that would be the end of it?"

"You mean the kidnapper wouldn't be satisfied?" Miss Wilson asked. "But I assure you that . . . I mean, it seems only *reasonable*—"

"To hell with the kidnappers!" McGregor roared. "And my nephew too, for that matter. What I'm talking about is the IRS."

"IRS?"

"The Internal Revenue Service, you idiot! The tax people."

"Oh," Miss Wilson said, indicating plainly that she still did not understand.

"Suppose I *did* raise \$200,000 and paid off the kidnappers? The tax people would want to know *how* I managed to accumulate that much money."

"But . . ." Miss Wilson gestured. "The lot has been prospering."

McGregor smiled with acute pain. "Actually, business has been terrible. You don't see the *whole* picture, Miss Wilson. There are a lot of expenses you don't know about. Anyone examining my tax returns—to take a random example—would see immediately that over the past fifteen years I've barely managed to eke out a living. So how

could I possibly have \$200,000 so readily handy to pay off some kidnapper?"

Miss Wilson made a few more marks on her pad. "Just how much do you think you could *safely* raise?"

McGregor shrugged absently. "Twenty thousand." Then he stiffened. "But, no. On principle, I refuse to pay a dime."

"But if you *don't* raise the money—or a reasonable portion of it—the kidnappers will surely dismember your nephew."

McGregor's jaw firmed. "I've seen no evidence of that yet."

He was a compact man with a pink-skulled crew cut and a firm handshake. "The name is Jones," he said. "Amos Jones. I'm president of the Used Car Dealers Association of this county."

McGregor nodded. "I've seen your picture in the trade magazine."

Jones came immediately to the point. "Mr. McGregor, you are giving the entire business a bad name."

McGregor frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that our collective image with the general public is already pretty . . . Well, there are all kinds of vicious jokes about us and you aren't making things any pleasanter. People consider you—and by inference, *all* of us—to be heartless, un-

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Miss Wilson nodded absently.

Jones regarded her coldly for a moment and then resumed. "We used car dealers are doing a job—a dirty job at times—but one that must be done. No one seems to appreciate that fact."

McGregor agreed. "There are times I could cry."

Jones returned to the point. "For the sake of the business and public relations, the association thinks you ought to pay the ransom."

"But the kidnappers are bluffing," McGregor protested. "We haven't gotten one toe, one finger."

Jones acknowledged that. "But there is still the overall hardhearted aspect of it—deliberately running the risk of seriously handicapping your nephew before you consent to pay the ransom."

McGregor ran a handkerchief over his forehead. "I am not hardhearted. The point is that I don't dare—couldn't *possibly* raise \$200,000. Even if I wanted to."

"The best he can do is \$20,000," Miss Wilson said.

McGregor glared at her and then turned back to Jones. "Suppose I did raise the money and ransom my nephew. Naturally the IRS would want to know where I got it. And suppose the IRS finds—" He corrected that. "Suppose the IRS decides—for some insidious reason of

its own—to frame me for income tax evasion? Suppose I was found guilty? Suppose I draw a sentence of ten years? I don't think I would be at all happy with that."

Jones was inclined to agree.

McGregor showed shark's teeth. "I might be so unhappy that I'd blow the whistle. I'd tell everything I know about the ins and outs of evading . . ."

Jones felt obliged to defend the industry. "Ninety-five percent of all used car dealers are honest. Or nearly so. They have nothing to fear from the IRS."

McGregor chuckled significantly. "But what about the remaining five percent?"

Jones rose. "Don't do a thing until you hear from me again."

Amos Jones returned two days later. "I've been in touch with members of the association and I've explained the delicate nature of your situation. We've decided that if you put up \$20,000, we will lend you the difference—\$180,000."

McGregor raised an eyebrow suspiciously. "The association has some kind of a special fund?"

"Well, no," Jones said. "It's just that we felt that we ought to help out a fellow dealer in his hour of need. We're spreading the tab around the association so that nobody gets the bite too hard. And when you get right down to it, it's

not bad publicity either. It shows that we have heart."

McGregor smiled tightly. "You used the word *lend*?"

Jones nodded. "With absolutely no interest. Not even a carrying charge and, believe me, that's restraint."

McGregor rejected the deal. "There's just one basic trouble with borrowing money. You have to pay it back." He shook his head. "In order to pay *back* \$180,000, I'd have to *get* \$180,000. And the IRS people would be watching how I did that with a great deal of interest. They'd be on my back." He sat back in his swivel chair. "As far as I can see, we're right back where we started."

There was a silence and then Miss Wilson spoke up. "Wouldn't it be simpler if the association *donated* the money to the noble cause of freeing Mr. McGregor's nephew? As you mentioned, it wouldn't be putting the bite too much on anybody. And just think how much more favorable the publicity would be."

Jones chewed on his cigar. "I'll take it up with the board."

He returned twenty-four hours later with a large package. "Well, here it is, \$180,000. I suppose you got your \$20,000?"

McGregor moved reluctantly to the wall safe.

Miss Wilson smiled. "I'll make a

list of the serial numbers of the bills. Captain Dakin will want them, you know."

Albert ran a pencil down their check list. "I don't think it will do any good to ask the police to stay away from the pickup point."

"It's just form," Nora said. "And our final note will also insist that I act as the intermediary and carry the money. It will direct that I arrive at the bus stop at 120th and Hillcrest at 2:45 a.m."

"The police will undoubtedly have the area staked out before you get there."

"Of course. But they won't interfere with anything as long as they think you are still in the hands of the kidnappers." She poured milk for Albert. "The note will direct me to turn over a brick just behind the bench at the bus stop. There I will find another note further instructing me to drive on two blocks to the public phone booth at 122nd and Hillcrest. At exactly three, the phone will ring and I will answer it."

"Is it necessary that I make the phone call at all?" Albert asked. "Couldn't you just *pretend* the phone rang?"

"No. There's always the possibility that the police might make an effort to find out if there really was a phone call to that booth at that

particular time. The thing being stored these days can be able to do that."

Albert couldn't make the call. He made the call at the university. I'll keep the hang up, within a minute."

"Be sure to have a beard," Nora said. "The picture's appearance, we were recognized. I drive to the Wellington F street lights."

"The police

"Very likely able distance. I'm very cautious about the transaction. I shut off the lights there will be puts me in to there fifteen car lights, and McGregor and I that while I speak by phone—a proached at money, which told me that later in the day. Albert's per other item on money?"

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thing being computerized and  
stored these days, they just might  
be able to do that."

Albert conceded. "All right. I'll  
make the call from a booth at the  
university. I won't say a word, but  
I'll keep the line open until you  
hang up, which should be in about  
a minute."

"Be sure to wear your false  
beard," Nora said. "Now that your  
picture's appeared in the news-  
papers, we wouldn't want you to be  
recognized. After I hang up I will  
drive to the undeveloped section of  
Wellington Park where there are no  
street lights."

"The police will follow?"

"Very likely. But at a consider-  
able distance. They will be extreme-  
ly cautious so as not to ruin the  
transaction. I will park the car and  
shut off the lights. Considering that  
there will be no moonlight, that  
puts me in total darkness. I will sit  
there fifteen minutes, turn on the  
car lights, and drive back to Mc-  
Gregor and Dakin. I will tell them  
that while I sat there—as instructed  
by phone—a shadowy figure ap-  
proached and demanded the  
money, which I gave him, and he  
told me that you would be released  
later in the day."

Albert's pencil hovered over an-  
other item on the sheet. "And the  
money?"

"I will have it stowed away in  
that little compartment we created  
under the front seat of my car."

Albert nodded. "What about the  
serial numbers of the bills?"

Nora smiled. "Captain Dakin has  
a list of numbers, but I don't think  
they'll do him any good."

Albert put down the pencil. "At  
five o'clock, I'll remove the beard  
and stagger into the nearest police  
station looking bewildered."

In his apartment later that week,  
Albert unwrapped the ransom pack-  
age.

Amos Jones lit a fresh cigar.  
"What made you turn to me for  
help?"

"We were stymied," Nora said.  
"Albert's uncle wouldn't pay a cent  
to redeem him, we had no source  
of fingers or toes, and even publicity  
didn't seem to be working. That's  
why I came to you. We needed  
something different."

Jones watched Albert divide the  
stack into three even piles. "I could  
have gone to the police. What made  
you think I wouldn't?"

Albert smiled thinly. "You per-  
sonally sold me that red convertible  
I drive. I figured that anybody  
who'd deliberately stick a fellow  
used-car salesman with a lemon like  
that would do anything for a buck."

Amos Jones smiled and began  
counting his money.